

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 OMB-01 /060 W

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R 060350Z DEC 77

FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1915

INFO AMCONSUL MELBOURNE

AMCONSUL SYDNEY

AMCONSUL BRISBANE

AMCONSUL PERTH

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 CANBERRA 8501

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, AS

SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN ELECTIONS: THE VIEW FROM BRISBANE

1. THE FOLLOWING REPORT, PREPARED BY CONSUL THOMAS E. CUMMINGS IN BRISBANE, IS SUBMITTED AS A MATTER OF INTEREST TO WASHINGTON READERS.

2. BEGIN TEXT OF BRISBANE REPORT: OVER THE PAST WEEK I HAD LONG, SEPARATE TALKS ON POLITICAL MATTERS WITH THE STATE DIRECTORS OF THE THREE MAJOR PARTIES: JOHN LEGGOE (LP); MIKE EVANS (NCP); AND GERRY JONES (ALP).

3. ALTHOUGH, UNDERSTANDABLY, EACH PARTY LEADER INTERPRETED THE OUTCOME OF THE NOVEMBER 12 STATE ELECTION SO AS TO PUT THE BEST POSSIBLE FACE ON IT FROM HIS PARTY'S POINT OF VIEW, EACH PREDICTED A VERY CLOSE FEDERAL ELECTION ON DECEMBER 10.

4. SUMMING UP, ALL THREE PARTY CHIEFS FORESEE THE ALP

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DEFINITELY WINNING THREE SEATS; PROBABLY WINNING A FOURTH; AND VERY POSSIBLY WINNING FIVE MORE. CONVERSELY, ALL THREE EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT SIX SEATS ARE "SAFE" FOR THE L/NCP COALITION. LEGGOE AND EVANS BELIEVE THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE WILL WIN NARROWLY IN THE NEW SEAT OF FADDEN (ONE OF ONLY FOUR THREE-CORNERED CONTESTS) WITH THE HELP OF NCP PREFERENCES. (MOST OF MY OTHER

CONTRACTS AGREE.) JONES, ON THE OTHER HAND, BELIEVES POPULAR FORMER BRISBANE LORD MAYOR CLEM JONES, THE ALP NOMINEE, WILL WIN THE SEAT BY A NOARROW MARGIN.

5. LEGGOE IS VERY WORRIED ABOUT THE BIG SWING (AROUND 12 PERCENT) TO THE ALP ON NOVEMBER 12 IN WHAT HE CALLS THE "MORTGAGE BELT", I.E., THE NEW SUBURBAN TRACTS ON THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN FRINGES OF BRISBANE PEOPLED HEAVILY BY YOUNG COUPLES WHOSE MAIN CONCERNS ARE HIGH INTEREST RATES AND HOUSING COSTS, GETTING TO AND FROM WORK AND (SINCE MOST NEED TWO INCOMES) UNEMPLOYMENT. HE FEARS THAT IF A SWING OF THE SAME MAGNITUDE OCCURS TWO WEEKS FROM NOW THE ALP MAY WIN THE FEDERAL SEATS OF PETRIE AND FADDEN. THIS WILL HAPPEN, HE SAID, "IF FRASER IS PERCEIVED BY YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE AUTHORITARIAN AND UNCARING, IN THE BJEKLKE-PETERSEN MOLD". HE TOLD ME HE HAS EMPHASIZED REPEATEDLY TO THE LEADERSHIP IN CANBERRA THAT FRASER WILL HAVE TO COME ACROSS AS "STRONG AND CARING" BUT HE IS NOT CERTAIN THAT THE MESSAGE HAS GOTTEN ACROSS AS YET.

6. STATE ELECTION POST-MORTEM: IN THE EARLY AFTER-MATH OF THE NOVEMBER 12 STATE ELECTION THE RESULTS WERE INTERPRETED AS SHOWING (1) A SOLID ENDORSEMENT FOR JOH BJELKE-PETERSEN AND THE NCP (WHOSE VOTE WAS DOWN LESS THAN ONE PERCENT FROM 1975); (2) A BIG COMEBACK LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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FOR THE ALP (WHICH WENT INTO THE ELECTION WITH ONLY 11 STATE PARLIAMENT SEATS AND EMERGED WITH 24); AND (3) A SEVERE SETBACK FOR THE LP. THE STATE PARTY LEADERS DO NOT, OF COURSE, SEE THINGS THAT WAY AT ALL. JONES POINTS OUT THAT THE NCP CONTESTED MORE SEATS THIS YEAR THAN IN 1975 AND THAT IN RELATION TO SEATS CONTESTED ITS VOTE WAS DOWN NINE PERCENT. HE ALSO DRAWS CONSIDERABLE COMFORT (AND LLEGGOE, I SUSPECT, BUT LITTLE LESS) FROM THE FACT THAT THE ALP WON BACK THE NCP'S ONLY TWO SEATS IN METROPOLITAN BRISBANE, AND THAT THE LIBERALS OUSTED THE NATIONALS FROM TWO OTHERS, IN BOTH CASES THANKS TO ALP PREFERENCES. AS JONES AND LEGGOE SEE IT, NCP NOT ONLY LOST ITS BID TO MAKE INROADS INTO URBAN AREAS BUT IN FACT LOST MOST OF THE FEW METROPOLITAN TOEHOLDS IT HAD.

7. LEGGOE ATTRIBUTES THE LIBERALS' LOSSES IN BRISBANE IN LARGE PART TO THE "HEAVY-HANDED TACTICS" OF PREMIER JOH BJELKE-PETERSEN, MAINLY THE BANNING OF ANTI-URANIUM STREET MARCHERS AND MASS ARRESTS OF VIOLATORS WHICH, HE SAID, CAUSED MANY UNIVERSITY PEOPLE AND "TRENDIES" TO VOTE ALP. JONES VOICED THE CYNICAL VIEW THAT SOME

OF THE "BLUNDERS" THE PREMIER COMMITTED IN THE LAST WEEK
OF THE CAMPAIGN WERE NOT BLUNDERS AT ALL BUT RATHER WERE
DONE DELIBERATELY WITH THE AIM OF HURTING THE LIBERALS
IN BRISBANE (THEIR CHIEF STRONGHOLD) IN THE HOPE THAT THE
NCP WOULD EMERGE FROM THE ELECTIN WITH ENOUGH MARGIN
OVER THE LP TO ALLOW IT TO FORM A MONOCOLOR GOVERNMENT.
EVANS, OF COURSE, REJECTS THAT THEORY, CLAIMS THE
LIBERALS HAVE ONLY THEMSELVES TO BLAME FOR THEIR POOR
SHOWING. HE IS BITTER ABOUT THEIR HAVING CHALLENGED
SITTING NCP MEMBERS IN SEVEN DISTRICTS WHICH, HE SAID,
VIOLATED A LONGSTANDING "CONVENTION" BETWEEN THE TWO
COALITION PARTIES. HE SAID THEY SPENT TOO MUCH MONEY
IN THOSE DISTRICTS AND NOT ENOUGH ELSEWHERE. LEGGOE
MAKES THE SAME CHARGE AGAINST THE NCP, CLAIMING IT
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WASTED RESOURCES ON A FUTILE EFFORT TO WIN THE BRISBANE
SEATS FROM THE LP AND IN THE PROCESS FATALLY STARVED
SOME OF THEIR OWN CANDIDATES IN NORTHERN COASTAL DIS-
TRICTS WHO LOST OUT (IN SOME CASES VERY NARROWLY) TO
ALP CHALLENGERS.

8. THE PARTY LEADERS, PREDICTABLY, SEE THE ALP'S PERFORMANCE DIFFERENTLY. JONES INSISTS LABOR WON A BIG VICTORY BY RECOVERING MORE THAN HALF THE VOTES IT LOST IN 1975 AND MORE THAN DOUBLING ITS SEATS. EVANS AND LEGGOE, ON THE OTHER HAND, BELIEVE THE ALP DID POORLY OVERALL SINCE IT MADE NO SIGNIFICANT INROADS IN RURAL AREAS, FAILED TO RECAPTURE ITS "NORMAL" URBAN VOTE OF AROUND 46 PERCENT (IT RECEIVED ONLY 43 PERCENT), AND WOUND UP WITH EIGHT FEWER SEATS THAN IT HAD IN 1972 (24 V. 32).

9. PERHAPS THE CHIEF QUESTION STILL TO BE ANSWERED IS WHETHER, IN LIGHT OF THE RELATIVELY HEAVY VOTE DECLINE THEY SUFFERED VIS-A-VIS THE NATIONALS, THE LIBERALS WILL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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CONTINUE TO RETAIN EIGHT STATE CABINET PORTFOLIOS. EVANS AND LEGGOE TOLD ME THEY BELIEVE THE PREMIER WILL BE GENEROUS (EVANS SAID "MAGNANIMOUS") IN VICTORY AND WILL NOT AXE ANY LIBERAL MINISTERS. JONES, ON THE OTHER HAND, EXPECTS THE PREMIER WILL AT THE VERY LEAST INSIST ON REPLACING A COUPLE OF LIBERAL MINISTERS WHO ARE TOO LEFT-LEANING OR INDEPENDENT-MINDED FOR HIS TASTE WITH MEN WHO ARE MORE TO HIS LIKING. EVANS AND LEGGOE TOLD ME THEY BELIEVE BILL KNOX'S POSITION AS LIBERAL LEADER IS NOT THREATENED AS A RESULT OF THE ELECTION OUTCOME BUT JONES SAID HE THINKS KNOX'S POSITION IS "VERY SHAKY" AND THAT THE LIBERALS WILL DUMP HIM IF THEY FARE BADLY ON DECEMBER 10.

10. OTHER: TWO PROMINENT, NON-POLITICAL QUEENSLANDERS WHO CLAIM TO KNOW DEFENSE MINISTER JIM KILLEN TOLD ME RECENTLY THAT KILLEN "WILL BE THE FIRST TO GO" IN AN INEVITABLE CABINET RESHUFFLE SHOULD THE FRASER GOVERNMENT RETAIN POWER AFTER DECEMBER 10. BOTH SAID KILLEN DOES NOT GET ALONG WELL WITH FRASER, HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT INEPT ON DEFENSE MATTERS, AND HAS TOO MANY FRIENDS IN THE ALP. (WHEN I CALLED ON KILLEN LAST WEEK I SAW A COPY OF GRAHAM FREUDENBERG'S WHITLAM BIOGRAPHY "A CERTAIN GRANDEUR" SITTING IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS DESK BLOTTER, SUGGESTING THAT HE WAS PROBABLY READING IT BEFORE I CAME IN. IN THAT BOOK FREUDENBERG LIKENS KILLEN'S ORATORICAL STYLE TO THAT OF EDMUND BURKE AND CALLED HIM LABOR'S FAVORITE LIBERAL. A NEW BOOK BY DEANE WELLS, "THE WIT OF WHITLAM", REPORTEDLY SAYS MUCH THE SAME THING. THIS COULD BE THE KIND OF PRAISE KILLEN DOESN'T NEED AT THIS JUNCTURE.) END TEXT OF BRISBANE REPORT. ALSTON

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